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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 002588

SENSITIVE
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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [TH](#) [BM](#)
SUBJECT: THAI POLICY TOWARDS BURMA: THAI OFFICIALS,
ACTIVISTS, AND ACADEMICS DEBATE THAILAND'S NATIONAL
INTERESTS

REF: A. BANGKOK 2464 (PREVIEWING POLICY SHIRT)
[1](#)B. BANGKOK 2003 (REACTION TO ASSK VERDICT)
[1](#)C. BANGKOK 1219 (ASEAN STATEMENT ON ASSK ARREST)
[1](#)D. BANGKOK 1202 (REACTION TO ASSK ARREST)
[1](#)E. BANGKOK 517 (ASEAN SUMMIT)
[1](#)F. BANGKOK 505 (ASEAN CIVIL SOCIETY DIALOGUE)

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Classified By: Pol Counselor George Kent, reason 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Thai officials, academics, and activists debated Thailand's position, role, and policy vis-a-vis its problematic western neighbor Burma at Chulalongkorn University's Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) October 6. The speakers covered the wide array of issues in the complex Thai-Burma relationship, agreed that Thai national interests, not outside/western policy concerns, should dictate Thai policy, and lamented the lack of a clear strategy or mechanisms to achieve Thailand's interests. However, they did not reach consensus on how to define Thailand's national interest, given the mix of topics ranging from Thailand's energy needs, Burma's upcoming 2010 election process and outcomes, refugees, migrant workers, narcotics, diseases, and small-scale conflict involving ethnic minorities.

[1](#)2. (C) COMMENT: Thailand bears a larger burden, as perhaps the premier Burma "front line state," than any other country, and the complex mix of factors in play makes effective, strategic policy making difficult. The current Democrat Party-led government, particularly both PM Abhisit and FM Kasit, is more supportive of democratization efforts inside Burma and has vigorously pushed the issues as ASEAN chair (refs B-F). However, apart from activist politicians such as Kraisa Choonhavan, there are few voices from normally "progressive" academics in defining national interests more inclusively. Despite the efforts of the moderator to focus attention on stories of the Burmese-North Korean relationship and possible efforts to develop a nuclear program, speakers steered clear of the issue. Thai officials and commentators are still weighing the impact of the U.S. policy shift; seminar organizers distributed copies of EAP A/S Campbell's on-the-record briefing, and testimony provided by other commentators at the recent Burma policy hearing held by Senator Jim Webb. End Summary and Comment.

Eye to 2010 Elections: MFA view

13. (SBU) Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) East Asian Director General Kittiphong Na Ranong, who spoke last, trod carefully given the public nature of the forum (Note: he was more expansive in private with Charge the week prior, see ref 1A. End note). Kittiphong highlighted the importance of the U.S. policy shift and the potential Burmese response. Speaking candidly, he stated that the ten ASEAN countries had different interests and ideas on Burma, and it was tough to find common ground - Thailand's task the past year as ASEAN Chair. While national interests might not change, priorities sometimes did. Regardless of one's perspective of the upcoming 2010 elections, they would happen on the regime's terms.

14. (SBU) The challenge the international community faced with the 2010 process, according to Kittiphong, was not missing the opportunity to help open space in Burma for the benefit of all, to think of steps before and after which could contribute to progress. How the process unfolded depended on the steps the Burmese regime took, Aung San Suu Kyi's (ASSK) positions, as well as the reactions of the U.S., China, India, and ASEAN to developments. He recommended focusing on capacity building, on education, technical training for officials who would have to help improve administration/governance of the country, and economic development. Otherwise, the international community would be faced with "old wine in new bottles."

Security, Energy, and National interests: NSC view

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15. (SBU) NSC Director for the Bureau of Border Security Affairs and Defense Bhornchart Bunnag described how the end of the Cold War had changed the nature of security threats, from military/defense to more comprehensive concepts and transnational challenges. Thailand was the country most affected by Burma's situation, Bhornchart contended, from basic border security to migrants, displaced persons(refugees), narcotics, and disease. He suggested the guiding principles for policy should be pursuit of "good neighbor" relations, particularly given the 2500 km undemarcated border; ASEAN as an interactive mechanism for common interests and collective responses to shared threats; global fora/values, including the human rights and democracy agenda first promoted by former PM Chuan in the 1990s; and the influence of key external actors, principally the U.S., China, and India. Bhornchart expressed concern about the situation in Shan state, the potential for the Burmese regime to attack the Wa, and what the Chinese response might be.

16. (SBU) Bhornchart emphasized the growing importance that energy security was playing between Thailand and Burma. While the main focus for now was natural gas from the Yadana field, Thailand's energy needs over the next decade could only be met by hydroelectric power from the proposed Salween dam in Burma and Laos, unless Thailand succeeded in launching an expansive nuclear power generation program. Thailand's dependency on Burma for energy, which he claimed was now at 20 percent, would likely increase.

The Democratic/Human Rights Factor: AIPMC/activist

17. (SBU) Chair of the ASEAN Inter-Parliamentary Myanmar Caucus and ruling Democrat Party MP Kraissak Choonhavan took issue with more narrowly defined definitions of national interests. He emphasized that Thailand as a democracy needed to stand firm in highlighting the importance of human rights, whether it was monks being shot in the streets of Rangoon, Shan and Karen women being raped in eastern Burma, ethnic

minority workers exploited in large pipeline/infrastructure projects (the cachement area of the proposed Salween dam is the territory in which the events covered in the "License to Rape" report occurred, he stressed), or the large numbers of refugees that cross the border into Thailand. Thailand had stumbled early in the year with its handling of Rohingya boat people, but PM Abhisit had shown in his response, as well as his engagement of Burmese activists in the lead up to the ASEAN Hua Hin Summit, that he was a true liberal democrat willing to deal with these issues (refs E-F), in Kraissak's view.

¶18. (SBU) Kraissak also highlighted divisions within ASEAN over implementation of the ASEAN Charter, claiming Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia would support Burma, in the same way that Hun Sen had joined with Burmese PM Thein Sein in refusing to engage civil society reps at the ASEAN Hua Hin Summit. Kraissak lamented the reality that only Indonesia was willing to push for an effective Human Rights monitoring mechanism; based on the watered down result, Kraissak argued that Burma had more leverage/influence than any other country in ASEAN. With other countries like China, India, and even Thailand focused on resource extraction, whether energy, timber, or fish, Burma would continue to be able to control/balance relations with outside countries, limiting the impact of pressure for change.

Rethinking the Thai-Burma Security Strategy

¶19. (SBU) Retired Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Defense and former head of the National Intelligence Agency GEN Vaipot asserted that the Burmese military regime valued unity above all else, and that the junta distrusted Thailand due to the decades-old policy of using ethnic proxies to control buffer/border areas, even if that policy wound down starting in 1988. Gen. Vaipot suggested that Thailand needed a new security approach to Burma, based on

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preventive measures; consultation with NGOs; focusing on the ASEAN Statement of moving forward with diversity; and dealing with migrant labor and narcotics.

Historic Tipping Points and current concerns

¶10. (SBU) Director for the Institute of Asian Studies at Chulalongkorn University Sunait described the historical dimensions of Thai-Burma relations in the second half of the 20th century, identifying 1988 as a critical point of change in the relationship. Before then, Burma had been more dependent on Thailand for trade and addressing the powerful armed ethnic groups in eastern Burma. After 1988, Burma achieved more leverage, holding the keys to Thailand's inability to decisively address the cross-border problems of migrants, refugees, narcotics, and disease, as well as addressing energy needs.

¶11. (SBU) Expounding on the current security climate, Dr. Sunait lamented Thailand's inability to define its interests vis-a-vis Burma as clearly as China and India had. Thailand faced a dilemma in prioritizing issues within the complex relationship, lacked confidence in pursuing national interests that might be at variance with world views, and had not formed effective mechanisms to drive policy forward in an integrated manner, he concluded.

ENTWISTLE